

Rediscovering the cross country ski & snowshoeing trails of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Scott Slavik

Despite being in existence for over 40 years, the cross country ski trails adjacent to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters and Visitor Center may be Soldotna's best kept secret. Within minutes of leaving "downtown," skiers and snowshoers can be transported into the frozen stillness, tranquil beauty and muffled silence of the Alaskan outdoors while enjoying a traditional winter backcountry experience.

The Refuge manages the trails to offer users more of a backcountry skiing and snowshoeing experience. For the majority of our regular users, exercise and fitness are secondary to the opportunities to observe wildlife and to "just enjoy being outside." Beautiful scenery, solitude, peace and quiet seem to be more sought after rather than the burning of calories.

With nearly 10 miles of ski trails, skiers and snowshoers of all abilities can find a route appropriate for their skill level. Beginners can hone their skills on a 2.8 mile loop around Headquarters Lake while enjoying inspiring glimpses of the Kenai Mountains. This route is groomed wide enough to accommodate skate skiers as well as snowshoers. Even when trail conditions deteriorate, this route generally remains in fair condition.

After mastering the Headquarters Lake Loop you may be ready for the Cheechako Loop (.9 miles). This route, designed with beginners in mind, is relatively flat with a couple small hills to offer a modest challenge, increase your skills and boost your confidence.

The Howling Hill Loop (2.3 miles) is rated as Intermediate, perhaps more due to the length rather than the terrain. This route begins with a straight and level trek through wetlands and a black spruce forest. You are teased with a peek at Nordic Lake before turning and heading back to the trail head.

The Nordic View Loop (3.5 miles) parallels Nordic

Lake and offers the intermediate skier some terrain challenges. Be prepared to climb a few short steep hills, but know your effort will be rewarded with long satisfying downhill glides.

For hearty skiers craving a longer adventure, the 4.6-mile Raven Ridge Loop offers hills and turns to test your abilities and long upland straight-aways to really "stretch out" your kicks and glides. This route gets its name for the large numbers of ravens commonly seen in the area. I recommend bringing a camera on your next trip for some good photo opportunities.

My personal favorite, the Centennial Trail (2.8 miles) offers the greatest variety of habitats, scenic views and skiable terrain. Snowshoers and experienced skiers will enjoy lake views, majestic stands of hardwoods, wildlife viewing opportunities and long downhill runs.

Even though these trails are relatively short, users should plan for their day and always keep safety in mind. It is recommended that you first check with the Visitor Center for current trail conditions and help yourself to a ski trail map. Also, inspect your equipment before heading out on the trail, use trails equal to your ability, follow directional signage and dress warmly in layers. Bringing a few snacks, some water and a buddy is always a good idea when venturing out on the trail.

Regardless if your intentions are to strengthen quads and hamstrings or to enliven the spirit, you're invited to come enjoy longer days and blue skies while rediscovering the cross country ski trails at Kenai NWR.

Scott Slavik is a Backcountry Ranger on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.